



Melvin Van Peebles and his pals

Zwerin, Mike. International Herald Tribune [Paris] 26 June 2002: 26.

Full text

Abstract/Details

Cite

Email

Print

Save

☐ Add to Selected items

Abstract [Translate](#)

[Hide highlighting](#)

An evening titled "[Melvin Van Peebles] et Ses Potes" (and His Pals) featuring Van Peebles's own songs, along with gospel, rhythm and blues and jazz adaptations of the songs of the 19th-century cabaret artist Aristide Bruant will be presented at the Cafe de la Danse, near the Bastille, on Friday. Taking time out from the intensive rehearsals of the musical review that he is directing, choreographing and singing and starring in, he said: "I shoot the breeze between numbers, sort of like Charles Aznavour." He is not the sort of person who suffers from stage fright.

The concept of low overhead is indeed relative in the wide world of moving pictures, where Van Peebles is best known. What is considered Robert Altman's down-and-out period in Paris roughly a decade ago included a chauffeur-driven sedan and a cozy Left Bank apartment not far from Notre Dame. Van Peebles, whose low overhead covers residences in New York, Los Angeles and Paris's Pigalle, rose to the level of what one journalist called an "iconic presence" after he produced, directed, starred in and wrote the music for "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," a controversial movie about a black man on the run after killing two white policemen.

He wrote the screenplay for "Greased Lightening" (1977), with Richard Pryor playing the black race-car driver Wendell Scott. In 1995, co-producing with his son Mario, who directed it (Mario recently portrayed Malcolm X in "Ali"), Van Peebles wrote the script for "Panther," a fictionalized account of the rise of the Black Panther Party. The Panthers had declared "Sweetback" required viewing for its members. Van Peebles was "pleased they recognized it. I was in complete sympathy with the Panthers."

Full Text [Translate](#)

[Turn on search term navigation](#)

An evening titled "Melvin Van Peebles et Ses Potes" (and His Pals) featuring Van Peebles's own songs, along with gospel, rhythm and blues and jazz adaptations of the songs of the 19th-century cabaret artist Aristide Bruant will be presented at the Cafe de la Danse, near the Bastille, on Friday. Taking time out from the intensive rehearsals of the musical

Related items

Search with indexing terms

People

- ☐ Van Peebles, Melvin
- ☐ Bruant, Aristide

Search

review that he is directing, choreographing and singing and starring in, he said: "I shoot the breeze between numbers, sort of like Charles Aznavour." He is not the sort of person who suffers from stage fright.

In principle, this one performance will be the end of it. Which is fine with him. Van Peebles "can't think of anything I'd rather be doing right now." Any hope he admits he may harbor for a longer run is not due to pressing need: "I don't have a mistress and I don't have a car. I have a low overhead. As Thoreau said, you're rich in relation to what your needs are."

The concept of low overhead is indeed relative in the wide world of moving pictures, where Van Peebles is best known. What is considered Robert Altman's down-and-out period in Paris roughly a decade ago included a chauffeur-driven sedan and a cozy Left Bank apartment not far from Notre Dame. Van Peebles, whose low overhead covers residences in New York, Los Angeles and Paris's Pigalle, rose to the level of what one journalist called an "iconic presence" after he produced, directed, starred in and wrote the music for "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," a controversial movie about a black man on the run after killing two white policemen.

Made in 1971 for \$500,000 (10 percent of it borrowed from Bill Cosby), it was dedicated to "all the brothers and sisters who have had enough of The Man." It grossed \$10 million in the first year and spawned Hollywood's "Blaxploitation" trend, a credit he is not particularly proud of. "The term really has nothing to do with me. It has a derogatory sense to it. You know, everybody tries to keep us in our place with these limiting labels."

His first film, produced in France in 1968, was "La Permission" (The Story of a Three Day Pass), about a romance in France between a black American soldier and a Parisian woman. "Watermelon Man" (1970) starred Godfrey Cambridge playing a white bigot who wakes up black one day.

He wrote the screenplay for "Greased Lightening" (1977), with Richard Pryor playing the black race-car driver Wendell Scott. In 1995, co-producing with his son Mario, who directed it (Mario recently portrayed Malcolm X in "Ali"), Van Peebles wrote the script for "Panther," a fictionalized account of the rise of the Black Panther Party. The Panthers had declared "Sweetback" required viewing for its members. Van Peebles was "pleased they recognized it. I was in complete sympathy with the Panthers."

In "Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies and Bucks," a book about black filmmakers, Donald Bogle called "Sweetback" "an uncompromising, totally independent trailblazer that heralded a new kind of black cinema." He added that it "inspired a later generation of African American moviemakers like Spike Lee and Albert and Allen Hughes."

He's now writing a novel his 13th book without a contract. "If the

manuscript is rejected," he said, "the way I look at it, it will be the publisher being stupid. My point of view has always been that if the girl turns me down she's an obvious lesbian."

This outburst of what some might consider outrageously macho thinking is more likely some sort of "bad brother" shtick. It is, in any case, followed by a smile and a pregnant pause.

The self-confidence is real enough, but Van Peebles seems to be daring you to look behind a particular role it is amusing him to play. The posturing is tempered by his sweet and tender voice and a straight-faced ironic twinkle partly hidden by black-rimmed Harold Lloyd eyeglasses and the pulled-down visor of a James Cagney gangster cap. With his grandfatherly gray beard, laid-back hip manner and wide frame of reference, he resembles his fellow icon, the late adorable elder statesman of jazz he places a respectful hand over his heart at the mention of the name Slim (Vout-o-roonie) Gaillard.

Gaillard was an apple farmer in Washington state. Van Peebles was one of the first black traders on the New York Stock Exchange. His book, "Bold Money: A New Way to Play the Options Market" (1986) is still in print. Both of them were in the U.S. Air Force Gaillard a maintenance engineer in the groundbreaking black fighter squadron during World War II, Van Peebles the navigator and only black crew member on a B-47 bomber in Korea.

He recalled: "They all had thick southern accents. You would have thought I was an albino, the way they treated me. They were unbelievably nice: 'Y'all got to come down to our Bar-B-Q on Saturday.' Because they all knew that if the navigator makes a mistake, everybody dies." Van Peebles was reminded of his wartime experience when Halle Berry and Denzel Washington won Academy Awards: "Basically they owe their Oscars to the Taliban. When Americans are in trouble, suddenly we're all Americans somehow."

He has been called an enfant terrible, a Renaissance man and a one-man conglomerate; he has been a cable-car grip-man in San Francisco and a portrait painter in Mexico; he studied astronomy in the Netherlands and was a street musician and a journalist in Paris. He can write in French. The way he puts it: "I have various arrows in my quiver."

When his albums "Br'er Soul" and "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death," both recently reissued, were released by A&M Records in the late 1960s, that sort of thing was still filed under "spoken word." The recordings influenced such rap precursors as the Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron. "Actually," Van Peebles said, with his straight-faced twinkle: "It wasn't really me who invented rap. I stole the idea from Aristide Bruant." His music for "Sweet Sweetback" was performed by the then unknown group Earth, Wind & Fire; the sound track was their first album.

black people that suspicion

He wrote the book, lyrics and music for and co-produced the Broadway musical: "Don't Play Us Cheap." It was nominated for three Tony and two Grammy awards. In 1997, he performed in a cabaret set called "Br'er Soul and Roadkill" in the Fez Cafe in New York. According to Jon Pareles in The New York Times, he "turned rock, pop, Broadway and disco songs into extensions of his own down-home philosophy. As he sees it, most of us are roadkill on the highway of love."

The idea for the friendly musical review on Friday was born last year when Van Peebles was invited to a film festival called Festival des Trois Continents in Nantes. He thanked them but said: "I don't have a film this year." The festival's director Philippe Jalladeau replied: "No, we want you to be the entertainment." Why not? Van Peebles had nothing better to do and, he thought: "I'm too short to play basketball and too nervous to steal."

He took the song and dance arrow from his quiver once more and cast six young French singers (three women, three men) and six musicians in Nantes. They were, he says, "excited about it. It's an adventure for them, an opportunity to grow."

Selecting songs from "Ain't Supposed to Die," "Sweetback" and elsewhere, he put some demos together and told everybody to "get as close as possible to my partitions" which is advanced Franglais for "arrangements." "Save any suggestions for when I come back," he said, and when he did he was more than impressed. "Oh, man, man, man, man, man! These people are terrific. They are so talented and positive. They really want to do it the right way. Like Quincy Jones says; 'You've got to leave room for God in these things.'"

"It's another frame of reference here. I have to be totally specific in order to get the right feeling, the right texture. It's not New York, I can't just ask them to sound like the horns at the beginning of some Marvin Gaye record, or to 'put in some Monk.' I have to micro-manage. It's time-intensive work. I'm also my own sound and light director. There's no way I can delegate all of these responsibilities. Not that I have problems with any of it. I keep saying to myself: 'For once God got it right.'"

Credit: International Herald Tribune

Word count: 1426

Copyright International New York Times Jun 26, 2002